**Writing Conferences**

**What Is It?**

The writing conference is at the heart of teaching writing and is the core of the [writing workshop](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/reading-and-language-arts/skill-builder/48794.html).The writing conference is a one-on-one strategy, that takes place between the student writer and the teacher. Conferring is perhaps the best opportunity for direct and immediate teaching of the complex processes and skills involved in writing. Individual conferences generally are short, about two to five minutes, and occur while the other students are involved in their own independent writing projects.

One of the primary purposes of the writing conference is to help students take a deeper look at their writing and ask themselves questions such as, "What else do I want or need to say?" "What can I add?" "Does this make sense?" "How can I change this to make it better?" and "What kinds of questions will the reader ask?" Teachers, listening and asking questions during individual conferences, help students look at their own writing with a critical eye while also helping them begin to ask themselves these kinds of questions.

Conferences can occur at any stage of the writing process. As a result, they can be an avenue for one-on-one instruction covering a wide range of writing skills, strategies, and concepts.

**Why Is It Important?**

One-on-one conferences with students give teachers a chance to zero in on what each student needs as a writer. According to Don Graves (1994), the "purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing."

Perhaps the most important goal of teaching writing is to create independent writers. "Real" writers are constantly asking themselves questions—such as the ones above-about their writing and looking for ways to make it more meaningful, accurate, and clear—in short, to say precisely what they want to say and get their intended meaning across to their readers. According to Lucy Calkins (1994), "In order for young writers to learn to ask such questions of themselves, teachers and peers need to ask them of young writers. Teacher-student and [peer conferences](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/reading-and-language-arts/skill-builder/48881.html), then, are at the heart of teaching writing. Through them students learn to interact with their own writing."

Shelley Harwayne (2001) has four guidelines regarding her goals and what she wants to learn from student writers that she keeps in mind as she conducts her conferences:

* Find out how students feel about being asked to write.
* Find out if students take risks as writers.
* Find out if students understand what writing is for

Find out if students know how to improve their writing.

Conferences can be a powerful tool to begin to understand your students as writers and guide them to an understanding of themselves as writers.

**When Should It Be Used?**

Individual writing conferences occur at any grade level where students are involved in independent writing projects. Many teachers try to have an individual conference with every student at least once a week.

Teacher-student conferences generally occur after a brief focus lesson (mini lesson) launching the writing workshop and when students are working individually on writing projects.

**What Does It Look Like?**

Generally, at the beginning of the writing block, teachers will gather the class and conduct a focused lesson with the whole group. Often, teachers, especially in the younger grades, will engage the class in whole group discussions in which they model the kinds of questioning and discussions that they want to encourage later in individual conferences. Many teachers use a ["thinking aloud" strategy](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/skill-builder/problem-solving/48546.html) with a piece of their own writing, asking themselves questions about the work-in-progress out loud so that students learn to question their own writing.

Next, in a typical [writing workshop](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/reading-and-language-arts/skill-builder/48794.html), students work on individual writing projects while the teacher roams with a clipboard and a conference checklist, conferring briefly with as many students as possible.

When conducting writing conferences, the "golden rule" is to listen to the student. Teachers experienced with writing conferences focus more on the writer than on the writing. Many start the conference with a question such as, "Tell me about your writing." They then enter into a natural conversation with the student, telling what they understand, asking questions about what they don't understand, asking for more information or detail about something that piqued their curiosity, or posing other probing questions about the student's writing.

Carol Avery (2002) lists some questions she typically asks students, yet she makes the point that every student is different, so specific questions will vary:

* What is happening in your story?
* How did you get that idea?
* Will you put that information in your story?
* Can you tell me more? I don't know much about...
* When this happened, what do you remember most?

As you listen to the students talk about themselves as writers and about the pieces of writing they are working on, you begin to get a sense of where you want each student to go from here in his or her writing. Of course, previous conferences and your overall knowledge of the student will help you provide feedback that will move the student forward. Often, the needed feedback is very simple: "Keep going!" or "Write down what you just told me." In fact, simple, specific, and focused feedback is generally much more effective than complex or grandiose feedback, especially for younger writers. Think about what you want for that student as a writer. Where do you want him or her to be, and what is the next step to help him or her get there?

If you are new to writing conferences, just remember it is important to provide encouragement and good, focused feedback and to leave each student with a direction, a particular issue to concentrate on, or strategy to try out. At first, keep it simple! Feeling comfortable with writing conferences takes a little while. In time, you will gain confidence, learn to relax, and begin to talk less and listen to the student writer more. In time, you will learn to trust the fact that you know your students and can provide them with what they need to become better writers.

**How Can You Make It Happen?**

Start small, take your time, and keep it simple. Some teachers begin with just a few students as they get a feel for conferring. As you gain confidence, you can expand conferences to include each member of the class.

It is important to have the structures of a productive writing workshop in place and expectations clearly laid out so that students become used to the routine of the way writing time works. Other students should be busy on their own independent writing projects: Some might be drawing or brainstorming topics in the prewriting phase; some will be drafting; and others will be sharing; while still others will be revising. Some students might be at an editing center that you have set up or a publishing center with bookbinding materials. Establish these centers and a variety of activities before you start individual conferences.

It is critical that students learn not to interrupt a conference that is taking place. Emergencies, of course, happen, but in general, interrupting a conference should be off-limits.

Most writing teachers find it helpful to keep track of who has had a conference and the key points, issues, or focus ideas that came out of that conference. It is helpful to have a checklist of all students to ensure that everyone has regular conferences. Individual conferences should not last long—generally from two to five minutes.

**How Can You Measure Success?**

Because of their individual nature, writing conferences are ideal for assessing where students are in their writing progress. When teachers conduct short but regular writing conferences with their students, they can keep close track of their students' writing needs and adapt their instruction accordingly. Notes on writing conferences for individual students can be kept and reviewed to see progress over time. Recurring issues can be noted and addressed (you can tell if the conferences are beneficial if students are not repeating organizational and grammatical mistakes). Writing conferences are especially useful in tracking a student's progress within a particular writing project because they ensure that students are following through on writing projects to completion and engaging in the entire writing process, which will naturally make students better writers. Conferences are also quite valuable to see a student's progression through various drafts of a piece of writing, providing insights into the writer's thinking process.